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Food in Literature

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My project focuses on pawpaws, the largest edible fruit native to North America. The natural range of the pawpaw is limited to the eastern United States, stretching north to southern Ontario in Canada, in an area known as the Pawpaw Belt (Moore 234). Pawpaws are heavily referenced in American, including Native American, folklore.

Pawpaws have been known by various names: frost banana, bandango, custard apple, and the poor man's banana, to name a few (Moore 1). Though varied, what these names have in common is their attempt to capture the near-indescribable flavor of a pawpaw. The most common way people have tried to describe the taste of a pawpaw is a cross between a banana and a mango (Moore 2). However, the flavor can vary greatly from tree to tree and even fruit to fruit. Under cultivation, numerous cultivars have emerged, each with their own distinct flavor.

Historically, there is vast archaeological evidence that suggests that Native Americans culled pawpaws from the forest. At their earliest settlement sites, pawpaw seeds can be found in large, concentrated numbers, suggesting seasonal feasts of the fruit. (Moore 5, 9). The seasonal aspect of their consumption of pawpaws can also be supported anecdotally: pawpaws are ripe for a very short period of time and start to rot within days. To extend this harvest however, there is evidence that the fruit was dried and later used in stews and sauces. Specifically, the Iroquis used dried pawpaw in corn cakes. Nutritionally, the incorporation of

pawpaw into corn-based foods shows a beneficial pairing — pawpaw is high in niacin, whereas in corn niacin is not in a readily digestible form (Moore 10). In terms of folklore, Cherokee culture views pawpaw trees as a form of protection against witches (Mellinger 224).

The consumption of pawpaws continued after the colonization of North America. Out of America's Founding Fathers, records show that at least Thomas Jefferson and George Washington ate and planted pawpaws. Jefferson recorded both planting pawpaws at his Monticello estate, where they can still be found to this day, as well as sending pawpaw seeds to his associates in Europe (Moore 143). In Washington's case, all of his ventures were within the Pawpaw Belt. His plantation, Mount Vernon, overlooking the Potomac River, contained pawpaws in abundance, though they are no longer present in the plantation's formal gardens. Wild pawpaws still grow in the less cultivated areas of the plantation (Moore 145).

There is textual evidence, which suggests that during the Civil War both Union and Confederate soldiers ate pawpaws. One Confederate soldier wrote in his letters: "Whilst wandering through the woods one day, I found myself in the midst of a pawpaw grove and for the first time in 14 years tasted of that fruit that I had so often run over the hills in search of in my youthful days." (Bergeron 165).

In an Appalachian context, pawpaws have been an important food source as well as cultural item. Starting from the very beginning of the Appalachian frontier, "hunting" for pawpaws became a yearly tradition for Appalachian youth (Moore 19). To this day, the so-called pawpaw culture appears strongest in Appalachia when compared to other parts of the country (Moore 209). This could be attributed to the fact that Appalachia remained rural for much longer than other parts of the country and thus its citizenry lived off the land and still continues to find wild foods to supplement their diet with (Moore 210).

There have been various attempts to cultivate pawpaws. After the Civil War, true attempts of cultivating the pawpaw for commercial production began (Moore 24). In 1916,

the American Genetics Association announced a contest to find the country's best pawpaws. They were laying important groundwork for the cultivation of a potential commercial crop. The best fruits came from Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Kansas. Unfortunately, the competition brought no real change (Moore 29-30).

Neal Peterson was introduced to pawpaws in 1975. For the next 3 decades he bred the fruit and is responsible for 6 of the best cultivars currently available. Despite being retired, Peterson has remained an avid promoter of pawpaws. (Moore 37-46).

Pawpaws are currently experiencing a resurgence in popularity, thanks to in large part to Peterson. Various commercial pawpaw orchards are appearing across the Pawpaw Belt, the largest being the Deep Run Orchard in Maryland with over a thousand trees on 5 acres (Moore 69). In Ohio, Chris Chmiel founded the Ohio Pawpaw Festival in 1999 (Moore 85). Chmiel was also the first person to sell frozen pawpaw pulp, which is available to buy year-round, significantly increasing the potential of pawpaw as a commercial product (Moore 92). Moreover, Chmiel has been able to convince the grocery chain Kroger to stock his frozen pulp (Nordahl 17).

The current popularity of pawpaws is also evidenced by the vast amount of material recently being published about pawpaws both online and in print. Within recent years more and more material has been published about pawpaws, including but in no way limited to Andrew Moore's treatise on pawpaws, *Pawpaw: In Search Of America's Forgotten Fruit*. Moore's book gives a comprehensive account of the pawpaw: everything from where it grows, what it's impact has been on various aspects of American culture, as well as imagining how the pawpaw will develop in the future. Interestingly, Moore has collected information from a wide variety of sources, including professionals working with the plant, as well as people whose only experience with pawpaws is through eating them.

The significance of pawpaws culturally can also be seen through their role in literature as well as in cookbooks. Due to the current popularity of pawpaws, more and more cookbooks are starting to feature them as ingredients. Pawpaws are being hailed as America's "forgotten fruit" and thus commercial cookbooks have started listing recipes using pawpaws.

This can be seen in for example Darrin Nordahl's *Eating Appalachia: Rediscovering Regional American Flavors*. In the book, Nordahl discusses 6 different Appalachian "flavors", which are according to him, in need of discovery. This list of flavors includes pawpaws. Nordahl also gives a brief historical context of the fruit, but mainly focuses on their contemporary role in culture, specifically discussing the Ohio Pawpaw Festival at length (Nordahl 13). Moreover, Nordahl introduces recipes he has collected at the Festival, thus again focusing on the *nouveau* appeal the fruit holds (Nordahl 34-45). Nordahl's recipes include three different sauces that can be served with different meats — in the text Nordahl recommends the sauces with scallops, chicken, and steak respectively (Nordahl 39-45). The use of pawpaws in sauces can be linked back to Native American uses of the fruit, though Nordahl does not mention this. Nordahl also introduces a dish that is more focused on the pawpaw than the sauces: a pawpaw flavored panna cotta. The recipes found in Nordahl's book allow for the introduction of the flavor of pawpaw into food items or meals readers might already be familiar with.

The current excitement for pawpaws can also be evidenced by Sara Bir's pawpaw specific cookbook, *The Pocket Pawpaw Cookbook*. Sara Bir is a popular food blogger working under the moniker the Sausagetarian online, who has recently started publishing print materials as well. *The Pocket Pawpaw Cookbook* is an independently published zine comprising of 12 recipes, all featuring pawpaws to some extent. Bir's recipes range from Pawpaw teacakes to Pawpaw cornbread and even pawpaw gelato (Bir 12-32). Similarly to the recipes in Nordahl's text, Bir often adds pawpaws to recipes readers might already be familiar

with: cornbread is a typical staple in Appalachian foodways and gelato, while a foreign food item to the Pawpaw Belt, is currently popular and thus an item readers are expected to recognize.

In Appalachian literature pawpaws make an appearance in James Still's novel *River of Earth*. The novel follows an Appalachian family who is struggling with food scarcity, told from the point of view of a young child. For a period the narrator is separated from the rest of his immediate family and is sent to live with his grandmother. While living with his grandmother the narrator notes the ripening of the pawpaws (Still 154). While the pawpaws are ripe, the narrator visits one of his uncles in jail and brings him pawpaws to eat. The scene illustrates the kindness of the boy as well as his uncle, because the boy offers his uncle the bigger of the pawpaws to eat even though he himself has not had much to eat that day, and the uncle in turn takes the smaller of the two pawpaws (Still 159). In the novel, the pawpaws are eaten as fruit, rather than used as an ingredient in a meal.

The most well known literary portrayal of pawpaws would be a traditional folk song, called "Way Down Yonder in the Pawpaw Patch". The prevalency of Way Down Yonder is also evidenced by how most pieces of pawpaw research reference the song in some way. The lyrics of the song describe a group of children who go picking for pawpaws, bringing to mind how in Appalachia gathering pawpaws was a task typically delegated to the children. The lyrics of the song also describe one of the typical methods of gathering pawpaws: gathering the ones that have already fallen off the tree to ensure that they are ripe.

Even though pawpaws are native to North America and have been a part of American foodways starting from Native American foodways, they have largely fallen out of the cultural memory. The work of Chris Chmiel and Neal Peterson on the agricultural side and Andrew Moore and Darrin Nordahl, in raising awareness about pawpaws, are helping to

reinstate pawpaws as a common fruit. However, there is still a long way to go before pawpaws can be readily available as a commercial fruit.

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